



Henry J. Taylor

Provincial press in the USSR prints opinion features, letters to editor

Washington — Newspaperman Vincent S. Jones has summarized his recent 12,000-mile visit to the Soviet Union with nine other officials of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

"Pravda," the Communist party newspaper, means "Truth." "Izvestia," the Soviet government newspaper, means "News." A Moscow joke goes: "There is no pravda in Izvestia and no Izvestia in Pravda." But the group of traveling American editors did get the first really professional look on a nationwide scale, at what's really cooking in the Soviet press.

Delayed arrangements

It wasn't easy. Their admission negotiations began a year ago last December. These bogged down last spring. Then the negotiations were revived in midsummer, but even until the night the editors landed in Moscow they did not know where they would be taken or who or what they would be allowed to see.

At least one-quarter of the USSR is officially closed to all foreigners and another quarter might as well be because of the government,

agency which controls travel, won't take you there. And the U.S. editors also discovered that visiting American journalists must pay a fee to interview Red officials.

Izvestia's size

The Kremlin often calls Izvestia the world's largest newspaper: 7.7 million circulation. Actually, Tokyo's Asahi Shimbun is larger: 9 million. Our largest is the New York Daily News: 2.1 million daily, 3.7 million Sunday. The Philadelphia Bulletin is America's largest standard sized evening newspaper: nearly 650,000. But, in any case, Izvestia's editors made America's editors seem like deuces in a wet deck.

The French Foreign Legion has an expression "cafard" — a sort of feeling of bored depression. This seems to characterize the government editors of Pravda. Not so Izvestia's. They are party bigwigs.

Typical of the immense, callous and often cruel gulf that separates the Communist party hierarchy from everybody else in the Soviet's "classless society," Izvestia's editors are reminiscent of Kipling's Kim on the cluttered road, chewing his stick of sugar-cane and making way for no one below the status of king.

benefits that add up to a marvelous gravy train and can flash a magical little leather-card guaranteed to fix nearly anything.

This carries through to the provinces, our editors found. And they also discovered that the number of provincial newspapers, unknown outside the USSR and usually only four pages, is nearly incredible.

Newspapers are our seventh largest manufacturing industry. We have about 1,750 dailies and 63 million circulation, 575 Sunday papers with 50 million and 7,700 weekly newspapers with 22 million. The ASNE group found 2,600 newspapers in the Ukraine alone. And about the only operational complaint was a familiar one — not enough newsprint.

Editor Jones, a Gannett Newspaper executive, sees

provincial editors of the USSR now "venturing cautiously to write about matters which once were untouchable."

Moreover, the American group discovered a Communist party practice of testing public reactions by printing readers' letters and that they are apparently read and acted upon by the authorities.

For example, Kiev's chief newspaper features a roundup called "Thoughts Out Loud." It serves as a kind of opinion column. In the Republic of Georgia and all the way out into Eastern Siberia they saw this practice on a smaller scale.

Finally, they found most Soviet editors versed in logomachy but totally complacent — about as uninterested in the American principle of freedom of speech as in a horse race in Ireland.